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May 1, 2008

The Honorable George W. Bush
President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I am writing to you on two pressing matters that relate to our nation's veterans. First, I am strongly urging that in the wake of today's report relating to long-term care for injured veterans you direct the full resources of the VA toward addressing the gap in assistance that currently exists. Second, I am strongly encouraging you to investigate the recent revelations that information regarding veterans suicides was withheld and to insist upon the resignation of Dr. Ira Katz. Both of these issues directly affect millions of veterans through the United States, and I hope you will take them very seriously.

This morning, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Office of the Inspector General (IG) released a report which found that in the case of veterans who served in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) or Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and who suffered traumatic brain injuries (TBI) "long-term case management is not uniformly provided" and "significant needs remain." This is a devastating find, not only because this particular group of veterans will continue to live with severe disabilities due to their service to our nation, but because for more than five years now the VA had pledged to enact overreaching changes to ensure that proper and full care is getting to these veterans. Clearly, this is not occurring.

The IG's report found that more than a quarter of TBI patients interviewed who received inpatient care at a VA facility three years ago and who continue to endure significant disabilities currently have "significant unmet needs." These include difficulties in obtaining medical care, a lack of awareness of and assistance to receive needed vocational rehabilitation, and, perhaps most concerning, a lack of clearly needed supportive counseling and assistance in navigating the VA process. I strongly echo the findings of the IG that there is cause for concern on whether all OEF/OIF veterans suffering from TBI issues are receiving proper case management and assistance, and I encourage you to immediately put into place the necessary steps to demonstrate that this is being addressed and remedied.

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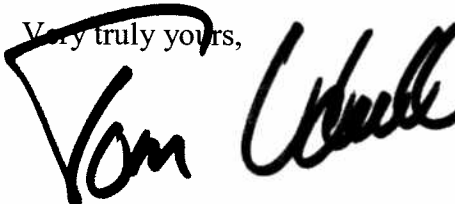
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Today's report is the second disturbing revelation to come from the VA in as many weeks, raising very real and very concerns. In addition to asking that you take a serious, proactive look at what led to the results in today's IG report, I am strongly urging you to investigate the recent revelations that information regarding veterans suicides was withheld and that you insist upon the resignation of Dr. Ira Katz.

Last December Dr. Ira Katz, head of mental health programs at the VA, testified before the House Veterans Affairs Committee. When he was asked by Chairman Filner and others on the committee about the issue of suicide among veterans, he expressed disagreement with a then-recent media report that more than 6,000 veterans had taken their own lives in the last year and stated that according to VA records there had been 780 suicide attempts in the last year. As you know, last week emails between Dr. Katz and others at the VA not only demonstrated that the media reports were correct, that an average of 18 veterans each day take their own lives, but that there have been an average of 1,000 suicide attempts every month.

This is a staggering figure on a tragic issue. The fact that Dr. Katz not only denied the validity of these figures, but also presented testimony to Congress and to the public that was egregiously misleading is absolutely unacceptable. While no one welcomes such statistics, is it vital that we know the true scope and depth of the situation. By presenting incorrect information, Dr. Katz delayed attention to the issue. I demand that he resign his position and that he take full responsibility for his actions.

Both of these issues point to a larger concern that the care for our nation's veterans is not what it should be. It is clear that significant steps must be taken, and must be taken now, to fix that situation. I hope in the coming weeks to see that you have directed the VA to take these steps, and I will continue to work with you on these matters as we go forward.

Very truly yours,


Tom Udall
Member of Congress